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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000432

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TAGS: [EAID](#) [EAGR](#) [ECON](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: UN PREPS 2009 SYRIA DROUGHT APPEAL

REF: A. 08 DAMASCUS 847

[1](#)B. 08 STATE 116623

[1](#)C. 08 DAMASCUS 874

[1](#)D. 08 DAMASCUS 857

[1](#)E. 08 DAMASCUS 820

[1](#)F. 08 DAMASCUS 792

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Maura Connelly for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. Syrian officials recently acknowledged the scope of the humanitarian disaster brought on by a four-year drought exceeds their capacity to respond. A combination of low rainfall and serious sand storms have all but wiped out the crop in Syria's three eastern provinces, and large-scale migration of farmers and their families to urban and agricultural centers in the west of Syria is underway. The SARG is seeking UN assistance, and the umbrella of UN agencies in Syria is preparing a joint 2009 Drought Appeal for the country. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (UNFAO) representative in Damascus expressed his hope that "improving relations" between the U.S. and Syria might encourage the U.S. to become a donor to the 2009 Drought Appeal. A needs assessment is in progress, but UN contacts expect that broad-based assistance will be required to supplement the SARG response. Post estimates Syria's total wheat consumption needs at two million tons beyond the projected 2009 harvest (2.8 metric tons, according to UNFAO contacts). Meanwhile, the SARG is working hard to rebuild its strategic wheat reserves, but may be hampered by a shortfall in storage capacity. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Syria is in the midst of a fourth year of severe drought. Rainfall in eastern Syria during the 2008-2009 growing season totaled only 30-50 percent of average. Though this accumulation is higher than in the 2007-2008 growing season, it still falls far short of requirements for the largely rain-fed agricultural provinces of al-Hasakah, Deir-az-Zour, and Ar-Raqqa in the northeast quadrant of the country. The area was also affected by several powerful sandstorms in early 2009 which wiped out what little crop had existed.

WHEAT HARVEST ESTIMATES

[1](#)3. (C) The SARG estimates the national 2009 wheat harvest will come in at 3.3 million metric tons (MT). Less optimistic than the SARG on crop yields under drought conditions, The UNFAO revises that estimate down to 2.8 million. According to Post's estimates, Syria requires 4.4 million MT of wheat for food and seed use for the 2009-2010 marketing and planting season. Additionally, Syria will use 400,000 MT of low-quality wheat or wheat from previous crops for animal feed. Thus, Syria's projected total consumption requirement for 2009-2010 is 4.8 million MT -- some two million tons beyond the projected 2009 harvest, according to UNFAO contacts. (Note: While the 2009 wheat crop yield may

not meet consumption demand, it does surpass last year's rock-bottom yield of 2.1 MT. End note.)

DIMINISHED STRATEGIC RESERVES

¶4. (C) Syria maintains a strategic wheat reserve, (unofficially) estimated today at two million MT. In 2005, unofficial estimates put the stockpile at approximately six million MT. (Note: Post's Agricultural Specialist conducted an assessment of SARG storage facilities and later confirmed his strategic reserve estimates against a partial release of SARG data. End note.) From 2005 onward, rising wheat prices tempted Syria to off-load some of its strategic reserves, and the country began exporting up to one million MT per year to Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Algeria, Italy and Yemen. When drought hit the 2007 crop, Syria was forced to consume some of its (diminished) strategic reserve -- and the country has been scrambling to re-build its stockpile ever since. Importantly, Syria lacks sufficient silo storage to appropriately control and protect its wheat reserves. Total silo storage in Syria is limited to four million MT, but this storage is not exclusively dedicated to the storage of strategic reserves. Wheat reserves that are not kept in silo storage are subject to approximately 20 percent annual loss due to rodents, insects and mold.

SMALL LIVESTOCK HOLDERS HARD HIT

¶5. (SBU) UNFAO estimates that small livestock holders in eastern Syria -- often women who are also the sole heads of household -- have lost 70-100 percent of their herds. Drought conditions have depleted available pasture lands, and poor crop residues have led to a sharp increase in the price of animal feeds locally. Most small herders have been forced to sell animals to buy feed for their remaining flock. As livestock prices drop and feed prices rise, small holders are caught in a downward spiral requiring them to sell more animals to feed fewer head of livestock. The UNFAO estimates that a staggering 25 percent of Syria's national herd has been lost as a result of the drought and crop failure. (Note: We saw similar trends last year. End note.)

WESTERN MIGRATION

¶6. (SBU) The dismal conditions in eastern Syria have led to a western migration of entire farming families. Indeed, Agence France Presse recently reported that up to 120 villages in eastern Syria had been "abandoned" due to "climate change." UNFAO estimates that 250,000 to 300,000 Syrians have already migrated out of the region. In most cases, these workers and their family members are seeking casual day labor on the outskirts of major Syrian cities (Damascus, Aleppo, Homs), and increasingly seeking work as casual farm laborers in agricultural areas near Jordanian border (Dara'a, As-Suwaida).

SCOPE OF DISASTER REQUIRES BROAD-BASED RESPONSE

¶7. (SBU) The SARG seems aware of the potential for increased social pressures resulting from this dislocation, and recently undertook a "social survey" to identify the poorest Syrian families. The government has announced its intention to begin distribution of a "food basket" to support the poorest of the poor in Syria. UNFAO interlocutors tell us, however, that the SARG acknowledges that the scope of the disaster exceeds the SARG's capacity to respond, and that the government is openly asking the UN agencies for assistance. The Syrian Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs have both visited the affected regions.

¶8. (SBU) UN agencies are preparing to launch a joint 2009

Drought Appeal for Syria. Unlike the 2008 Drought Appeal for Syria, which focused on providing seed stock and limited animal feed to 10,000 families in eastern Syria, the 2009 appeal will be broad-based. UN agencies will seek to provide seed stock, animal feed, replacement livestock for small holders, and technical assistance on water harvesting methods to those most affected by drought conditions in eastern Syria. Additionally, through WFP, the UN seeks to augment SARG efforts to provide humanitarian and food aid for up to 2 million Syrians living in affected areas, including some school feeding programs.

UN HOPING FOR U.S. CONTRIBUTION

¶9. (C) The UN is undertaking a needs assessment at present, which is expected to conclude by July 1, 2009. Though the U.S. did not contribute to the UN joint appeal for Syria in 2008, UNFAO Syria Rep Abdullah Tahir Bin Yehia told DCM and econoff of his hope that "improving relations" between the USG and SARG will allow for the U.S. to contribute to the 2009 appeal. Our UN contacts tell us that Spain, Italy, Canada and France have expressed an interest in contributing, and EU sources in Damascus have confirmed that the EU will contribute. The Chinese government donated \$500,000 to the 2008 appeal, and UNFAO expects that they will contribute to the 2009 appeal, as well.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: While the drought will negatively affect all agricultural output, the decline of Syria's wheat production is the most sensitive for the Syrian government. Ba'athist emphasis on the importance of Syria's ability to meet consumer demand has created a public expectation that Syria's wheat reserves will meet annual shortfalls. Last year, long bread lines underscored the sensitivity the SARG faced as it attempted to distinguish between public and private bakeries, with only the former eligible to receive subsidized fuel oil allotments. Another year of drought will put more pressure on the SARG to reassure the public that adequate supplies of low-cost bread will be available.

¶11. (C) COMMENT, CONTINUED: The USG declined to donate to the UN's 2008 drought appeal, but in November, 2008 PRM directed post to monitor the situation and to notify the Department should the situation worsen (refs A, B). It is our estimation that the situation has significantly worsened, and the projected shortfall in the wheat harvest is worrying. While it is unlikely that Syrians will starve, we agree with UN interlocutors that the ongoing migration from the rural east to Syria's western corridor, and the accompanying social and economic dislocation, could trigger a humanitarian crisis. Donor participation in the 2009 drought appeal would send a positive signal to the SARG and work to further our overall goal of re-engagement with the regime. Additionally, Washington may wish to further explore how prospective contributions to the joint UN appeal will be channeled to Syria, given past difficulties in getting U.S.-funded food aid into Syria through the World Food Program (refs c through f). END COMMENT.

CONNELLY